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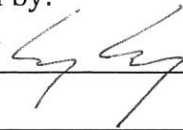
Flash as Fiction: Exploring Jennifer
Egan's nuanced portrayal of photography

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Flash as Fiction:
Exploring Jennifer Egan's nuanced portrayal of photography

A Thesis
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of the Requirements for Graduation Honors

Matthew Del Busto
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Abstract

Photographs are everywhere. They're blown up on billboards, airdropped via iPhones, and slapped on the sides of semis, telling stories of war, politics, sport, and most everything in between. Yet, how much credence should we allow photographs, which display not reality itself but a two-dimensional abstraction of a single moment's reality? As the ubiquitousness of images continues to increase, it is more critical now than ever to understand photography as a cultural force having measurable influence on both society as a whole and the individuals within it. In the writing of Pulitzer Prize-winning author Jennifer Egan, ideas about photography and images are woven into her work, implying a nuanced truth: while photography can capture a moment's truth in perpetuity *or* manipulate generations to come by presenting a contrived reality, people's experiences with photography generally land somewhere between truth and manipulation. As such, this paper will briefly explore photography's omnipresence and its implications on present-day society. Further, close reading practices coupled with careful textual analysis of key moments in Egan's work will investigate how she describes images and photography within her texts and what she suggests to us, as readers, regarding our relation to the world, to the photograph, and to one another. This research and analysis will allow me to investigate if, as Egan writes in her novel *Look at Me* (2001), "we are what we see" (p. 390) in order to examine how we understand reality and what role we should allow the camera to play in our photo-centric society.

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“I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13)

After all, what is a photograph but an attempt to capture and tame the terrible abyss of eternity? Thus the photograph will always be connected to the birth of thought and the self-awareness of one's place in time and one's brief stay.

—Damian Sutton, “The New Uses of Photography,” p. 230

“You spend your whole life watching other people,” he said. “I have a feeling it eats away your soul.”

“That’s funny,” I said. “I thought being photographed did that.”

—Jennifer Egan, *Look at Me*, p. 150

And then the general smiled. It happened without warning: his lips pulled away to reveal two rows of small yellow teeth—*click*—that made him appear vulnerable, eager to please. *Click, click, click*—Dolly was shooting as fast as she could without moving her hand, because that smile was it, the thing no one had seen, the hidden human side of the general that would dumbfound the world.

—Jennifer Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p. 158

Flash as Fiction: Exploring Jennifer Egan's nuanced portrayal of photography

Introduction

“If Jennifer Egan is our reward for living through the self-conscious gimmicks and ironic claptrap of postmodernism,” the *Washington Post*'s Ron Charles writes in his review of *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, “then it was all worthwhile” (Ron Charles). Receiving the 2011 Pulitzer Prize, Egan's novel was heralded as “[a]n inventive investigation of growing up and growing old in the digital age, displaying a big-hearted curiosity about cultural change at warp speed” (The Pulitzer Prizes). *Goon Squad* was so popular, in fact, it caused many of her previously published books to be pulled off the shelves over a decade after their release: “As one of the many readers who were captivated by Jennifer Egan's [*Goon Squad*], ... I went scurrying back to her earlier novels, hungry for more. Fellow Goon fans won't be disappointed,” Holly Williams of Independent wrote of Egan's 1995 *Invisible Circus* 17 years after it was published, before adding it is “hard to believe” *Invisible Circus* was her debut novel (Holly Williams).

Along with her Pulitzer Prize, Egan has earned myriad of other awards. Among them include *Goon Squad* also being lavished with the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction and the LA Times Book Prize. Additionally, Egan herself has received numerous fellowships, including the Guggenheim Fellowship, a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in Fiction, and a Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Fellowship at the New York Public Library. Most recently, her *New York Times* Bestseller *Manhattan Beach* (2017) won the 2018 Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction.

Goon Squad, which remains her most critically acclaimed and reviewed book, has understandably received the most attention from scholars, who have consistently focused on two central aspects of the book: time and music. Many of these analyses spring from *Goon Squad*'s penultimate chapter, notable both for its form (it is composed entirely of PowerPoint slides) and content (a sister's detailing of her autistic brother's fixation on pauses in rock songs). For her part, Sharon Solwitz, longtime faculty member at Purdue University and fiction writer herself, explored the PowerPoint chapter and argued how the overt pauses in the chapter are emblematic of the pauses at the heart of Egan's novel. While Solwitz acknowledged her initial aversion to the PowerPoint chapter—"Oh dear, I thought, having loved the book till now, she's indulging herself" (602)—a second read of the book flipped her perspective: "[T]he PowerPoint chapter not only belongs and makes sense in the novel, it governs it" (Solwitz 606). Solwitz then champions her identification of what she calls *Goon Squad*'s "'methodological signature' ... the *idea* of pause, combined with the author's *use* of pause — of the intentional gap in time" (Solwitz 606).

Solwitz is not alone in her keen interest in the pauses in Egan's text. In "'Every song ends': Musical Pauses, Gendered Nostalgia, and Loss in Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*," researcher and author Danica van de Velde illuminates the interplay between "the pause," music, and time in *Goon Squad*:

This emphasis on silence and the suspension of closure is at the heart of Egan's book and her thematic concern with temporality as illuminated through musical structures. Rather than simply signaling the end of a song, the pause in Egan's text is employed as an overarching metaphor designed

to represent the threatening presence of all that is lost in the passage of time—the goon to which the book’s title refers. (van de Velde 123)

In a similar vein, scholar and musician Martin Moling explores Egan’s characters’ futile struggle against time, including Egan’s PowerPoint chapter on “Great Rock and Roll Pauses” (Moling 57-61), “the problem of digitalization,” (61-62), and “the punk apocalypse” (62-68). Ultimately, Moling concludes that Egan’s “infusing her novel with ‘punk time’” allows “new possibilities for fiction writing which may sustain the art form and provide it with a future where there seems to be ‘no future’ in sight” (Moling 74).

Considering Egan’s novel itself in relation with these scholars’ texts, it would be hard to argue with Jorgen Bruhn (2016), a film and literature professor at Linnaeus University, that “[m]usic is by far the dominant represented aesthetic mediality in the novel” (107). While these arguments do offer persuasive analyses of Egan’s novel, a cursory examination of this body of scholarship illustrates how the role of photography as an issue in her work has remained largely ignored. For instance, while Bruhn does admit that “[t]he visual arts are present in the novel too, as qualified medialities” and acknowledges photography, he allots it just two sentences before proceeding with his main argument (Bruhn 107-108). In his “What, in truth, is Photography? Notes after Kracauer,” an article first published in the *Oxford Literary Review*, scholar Andrew Benjamin observes “[t]he image in virtue of its presence as a photograph has been separated from a continuum. That separation is the creation of the photographic image. At that precise point the possibility of *the next moment* is suspended” (Benjamin 197). Despite a photograph’s representation of a pause in time, Solwitz neglects to mention the both the role of photography and the presence of cameras—devices which can freeze a

moment in an eternal pause through the production of a photographic image—in Egan’s novel (Solwitz 599). Yet, in allowing oneself to dive down alleys *other* than time and music, *Goon Squad* reveals itself to be a book quite concerned with the politics of the photograph. As such, I contend that a close read of *Goon Squad*—and not only *Goon Squad*, but Egan’s entire canon—illustrates photography as a central art form within Egan’s texts and provides, among other things, another lens on Egan’s sense of temporality in her writing.

Perhaps now more than ever in the age of fake news, we must maintain a careful eye when viewing the information that inundates us—this “information” certainly includes the proliferation of photographic images. Certainly, visual media in the form of videos and photographs have skyrocketed with the advent of the smartphone, a device with which over three-fourths (77%) of Americans reported being equipped with in Pew Research’s 2018 study (Pew). Moreover, the number of pictures circulating online and stored in our phones at once astounds and overwhelms. According to iDigic, a mind-boggling 95 million photos and videos are shared daily on Instagram; this totals a staggering 34.675 billion shared photos and videos per year (iDigic). In 2017, InfoTrends estimated that 1.2 *trillion* digital photos would be taken that year, meaning there would be “roughly 160 pictures for every one of the roughly 7.5 billion people inhabiting planet earth” (Felix Richter). Truly, then, we live in a saturation of photographs where nearly everyone is a photographer, or at least can be—94 percent of 18 to 29-year-olds own a smartphone (Pew). As such, an investigation into Egan’s portrayal of the camera and the photographic image in her works is a timely undertaking.

Like many readers of Egan's work, my first exposure was through *Goon Squad*, at which point I worked backwards and re-read her other books. With my interest in Egan's take on the photographic image already in the back of my mind after reading *Goon Squad*, I realized that from her first full-length novel, *Invisible Circus*, almost 25 years ago, Egan has revealed herself as someone dedicated to investigating the interplay between image and viewer; technology and truth; perceived reality and reality itself. A brief review of some of her works reveals this: a disillusioned teenager uses postcards to follow her now-dead sister's steps through Europe (*Invisible Circus*); a model with 80 titanium screws in her face after a near-fatal car accident struggles to re-enter the fashion world (*Look at Me*); an outcast-turned-wealthy-entrepreneur invites his estranged, technology-addicted cousin to help restore his castle-turned-retreat-center (*The Keep*); an undercover spy enters a terrorist's lair armed with intrabody technology ("Black Box"). With each subsequent text, Egan seemed to further color her analysis regarding the photograph. While it would be possible to write extensively on each of Egan's texts, I will anchor my analysis in *Invisible Circus* (1995), *Look at Me* (2001), and *Goon Squad* (2010) as well as providing supplemental support from *Emerald City and other short stories* (1996) and "Black Box" (2012). As such, I aim to provide deep analysis over Egan's texts from a fresh angle while unpacking her implicit yet powerful underlying commentaries about photography's extraordinary role in our lives. Simply put, Egan's incorporation of photography and image as having the ability to shape the perception of history remains an understudied yet significant key to the reader's understanding of her works.

In *Invisible Circus* (1995), Egan suggests the need to be able to move past the image-world in order to live in the present. Further, in *Look at Me* (2001), she urges readers to question the authenticity of visual recording devices by spotlighting the fragility of the subjects of photography and videography both. For its part, a focused read of *Goon Squad* illuminates Egan's implicit suggestion of photography as a tool, oftentimes a violent one, which pushes her characters beyond the present moment, allowing them to create a physical document—the printed photograph—as a means of shaping a subjective history. Yet, while Egan often illuminates the people behind the lens as perpetrators of violence, both the camera and the photographs themselves remain multifaceted devices. For instance, in Egan's short story, "Black Box," camerawork is crucial in capturing information regarding a ruthless villain—in stopping violence rather than creating it. More than anything, perhaps, Egan calls for a recognition of the power of the image and the weaponized status of the camera along with a constant questioning of the reality photographic images present. Such constant questioning proves itself a worthwhile task considering photography's fundamental difference from other art forms. In his "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," scholar Walter Benjamin writes, "The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web" (Benjamin 804). Just as the camera probes, so too must we probe that which the camera creates: the photographic image. While Egan does not suggest the camera is an inherently malicious device, photographers must recognize the potential for malevolence in every use of the camera.

Taken a whole, then, Egan's works reveal a nuanced message: photography is a multivalent tool and the person wielding the camera has the power to alter the course of history, yet whether they choose to endanger or to protect others remains in their power as they shape the future of society. Further, while photographers wield significant amounts of power, the aftereffects of the images they capture can only be determined by the image-viewers. Whether or not we as the general public allow ourselves to be convinced by and alter our actions and attitudes based on the reality presented in the photograph is ultimately in our hands, and the implications of our decision are tremendous. Moose, a brilliant yet disturbingly unstable professor in Egan's *Look at Me* asserts time and time again, "we are what we see" (*Look at Me* 111). If, then, we *are* what we see, and what we see are more images of reality than reality itself, what will become of the world and our perceptions of it? How many images will we allow ourselves to view, and when we view images, will we engage our minds in the difficult task of critically examining them or will we simply take them as is? Sitting with these questions is crucial both as we begin to engage Egan's work in relation to the image and, in a broader sense, as we seek to become more responsible citizens in the 21st century.

Invisible Circus

Egan's first full length novel, *Invisible Circus*, follows eighteen-year-old Phoebe on her quest to retrace the footsteps her older sister, Faith, took during a European trip which ended abruptly when Faith took her own life in Italy. Phoebe, whose childhood was darkened by both the death of her father due to cancer and Faith's suicide, busies herself with maintaining Faith's bedroom in perfect condition and resisting the attempts

of her older brother, Barry, and mom to focus on her own future. While the novel is less concerned with the camera itself, it is deeply involved with the photograph as a pre-existing historical document—a memento of the past that nevertheless has the ability to alter and influence the present. As such, Egan utilizes photographic images to serve as physical manifestations of Phoebe’s fixation on the past. By the end of the novel, Egan reveals the link between Phoebe’s feeling of freedom and her decision to look to her own future; specifically, through Phoebe’s choice to no longer allow photographic images to act as a stand-in for the idealized past she created for herself, Egan illuminates how Phoebe can finally live a meaningful life in the present.

Even before the novel begins, *Invisible Circus* displays a clear obsession with the idea of the picture. The book’s epigraph from German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach contextualizes the entire book and is an implicit point of reference throughout:

...for the present age, which prefers the picture to the thing pictured, the copy to the original, imagination to reality, or the appearance to the essence...*illusion* alone is sacred to this age, but *truth profane*...so that the *highest degree of illusion* is to it the highest degree of sacredness. (qtd. in *Invisible Circus*)

Specifically, Phoebe’s desperate obsession over the past illuminates her preference for illusion over reality. In an interview with Charlie Reilly, Egan notes something akin to Feuerbach’s logic when she talks about the dynamic of reality versus fantasy: “[W]e all know what happens when a fantasy is mistaken for an alternative way of life. ... Think of the addict who wants to transcend reality chemically over a lengthy period of time. It never works; there is always a price to pay” (Reilly 457). Yet Phoebe prefers living in

this illusory fantasy world—her insistence upon sleeping in Faith’s room and her desperation to keep the room as Faith had left it eight years prior reveal Phoebe’s inability to accept the present in which Faith remains physically absent. From the outset of the novel, Egan reveals these decisions on Phoebe’s part as deeply problematic: “Phoebe opened her eyes and looked at Faith’s room, the pictures and trinkets she’d struggled for so many years to keep intact. I’m right, she thought, it all makes sense. And then: How long can I go on like this?” (26-27). There is a self-awareness within Phoebe that her actions are irrational but her immense fear of facing her present reality in which her sister is dead smothers this awareness. Phoebe cannot move onto the present because she has invested her entire being in an effort to maintain the past.

One of the opening scenes in the novel presents a painful moment for Phoebe. She, Barry, and her mother have a picnic for her mother’s birthday and Phoebe gives her mother silver—a traditional present for someone’s twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Besides the fact that her father has been dead for years and that her mother has been in a relationship about which she has yet to tell Phoebe for fear of hurting her, Phoebe doesn’t even get the year right, because her parents’ twenty-fifth was the year prior (20). At her mother’s uncertain reaction and Barry’s anger, Phoebe “sensed her defeat” and realized that “[b]ehind all this lay a frame of past events, a structure upon which the present was stretched like a skin. A mistake in that frame made the world appear senseless—clouds, dogs, kids with fluorescent yo-yos—how did they fit? What did they mean?” (21). Present-day for Phoebe exists only as a veneer on top of the past; without the past, the present is meaningless for her. Egan presents Phoebe as unable to understand anything, even concrete objects (“clouds, dogs, kids with fluorescent yo-yos”) if she cannot

contextualize them to their position within the past (21). In the same interview with Reilly, Egan explains the imbalance in Phoebe's mindset: "[F]antasy and imagination are part of what makes reality bearable, even enjoyable and exciting. So there's a dialectic between those forces. In Phoebe, that dialectic was unbalanced by her preoccupation with Faith; it wasn't healthy because it made Phoebe's own life, her real life, seem insignificant" (Reilly 458). In the creation of *Invisible Circus*, then, we can assure ourselves of Egan's keen awareness of Phoebe's struggle to accept the reality of her present life.

Among other things, the amount of photographs and documentation Faith kept of herself in her room facilitates Phoebe's disillusionment with the present because they present physical realities for which she can long. When describing Faith's room, Phoebe takes special note of the pictures: "Faith's room was full of pictures, snapshots of toothless grins and Christmas trees" (27). Instead of triggering or representing fond memories Phoebe has of her sister, these photographs serve to enforce Phoebe's self-alienation. Jens Jäger, a modern history professor at the University of Cologne, reminds us in his "Elective Affinities? History and Photography" (2018) that "images play an active part in forming the ways we interpret reality" (Jäger 50). This is certainly Phoebe's case. To her, nothing is as real and important as the photographs of Faith; the photographs are not representations of reality so much as, in her mind, the truest reality there was. Yet, even the photographs themselves as physical documents are not impermeable to the passage of time.

This is an avoidable truth Phoebe confronts when looking at an old newspaper clipping which contained a photo of Faith and four others, who had gotten in an

altercation with the police at a protest: “The picture had darkened with time, so that even the white hexagonal patch on the thigh of Faith’s jeans (her irrefutable proof) had melted into the basic fact of violence, five people jammed together in what had proved to be a historical conflict” (77-78). The truth the photograph tells becomes obscured; further, Faith, who was able to act as a spokesperson for the photograph, is gone. In this sense, the photograph serves to show how just as the photograph began its inexorable melt, darkening into obscurity with age, so too had the very fact of Faith’s existence begun to melt: “[D]espite her [Phoebe’s] best efforts, there was a kind of erosion in the room, a sagging and curling and fading she was powerless to halt” (27). And just as Faith’s existence begins to fade, so too does Phoebe feel her own existence begin to blinker out, causing her to cling all the more to Faith. Phoebe’s obsession over the newspaper photo of Faith can be explained in part by Coventry University professor of photography theory and culture, Damian Sutton, in his “The New Uses of Photography” (2009). In the article, Sutton notes that photographs “inhere to the past and future ... Photographs always disrupt our sense of time and history since they make the remote event current (Damian Sutton 212). Phoebe certainly feels this disruption; the vivid emotions and heightened importance she still attaches to Faith’s impact on her life contradicts the physical deterioration of the photographs with time. Their unavoidable fade accentuates the pain Phoebe feels due to the tension between the fact of Faith’s permanent absence and Phoebe’s refusal to accept this fact.

Her prolonged struggle as she watches Faith’s room age and become gradually more different than when Faith lived in it is mirrored with her struggle to believe an old photograph she finds of herself sporting a “smile modest but certain, as if a giant

happiness were pushing out from behind it” as she sits between Faith and Wolf, Faith’s boyfriend (239). Looking at the photo in the present, Phoebe “felt a surge of longing disbelief—where had that moment gone? ... Only this image remained, mocking their absence. Pictures are sad, Phoebe thought. Pictures are always sad” (210). Phoebe sees the truth of this photo—her genuine happiness in the past, her sister fully alive—and laments her present situation. Here, the photograph serves to confirm openly to the reader Phoebe’s long-implied mindset, that the past was immeasurably better than the present; as such, the documentary effect of photography here confirms Phoebe in her sadness and disappointment. She finds pictures “always sad” because pictures relate past events, and for Phoebe, the imagined and/or pictured past is always superior to the present. Further, Phoebe’s sadness may be an understatement, because the “thought of photography is a thought of the catastrophic, that every photograph is potentially a traumatic event” (Sutton 214). While seeing the photographs seem comforting to Phoebe because they present a past reality that is preferable to her current one, they also serve as an implicit trauma: Phoebe can only see Faith in photographs because Faith is no longer present—she’s dead.

Despite Phoebe’s feelings of powerlessness against the decay of Faith’s room and photographs and her general melancholy, Phoebe makes the abrupt decision to follow her sister’s journey through Europe using the eighteen postcards Faith had sent home from Europe years prior. Much of Phoebe’s journey is listless, presenting failure upon failure as she “sensed her sister’s mounting impatience” for Phoebe on her journey to reunite with her, at least metaphorically speaking (150). In an effort to make “the final, crucial

leap” (150), Phoebe took the hit of acid she had carried around with her for years, which reached a false climax as she watched her reflection in a window as it

became another girl’s, a stranger whose presence made her shy ... another person’s hand reaching gingerly, gingerly out from behind the glass to touch Phoebe’s own, and it was Faith. It was Faith. From across the window Faith stood looking out at Phoebe, their two hands meeting on the glass ... I knew it, she cried, but silently, not moving her lips. I knew it, I always knew you’d come back. (153-154)

At this moment, Phoebe thinks she has finally done it, has finally made contact with her dead sister. The present has finally united with the past. Yet Phoebe feels she must get across and push through the window in order to finally access Faith and succeeds only in ramming herself “head-first into the glass,” injuring herself and alarming passerby (155). This instance of false climax for Phoebe only acts as the culminating failure of years of struggle to break through the barrier between past and present. Phoebe is forced to confront reality and resists it in every way possible. Her acid trip ends with her back in her hotel room where, “[s]eized by a spasm of anger, Phoebe slammed her fist into the mirror, shattering her own startled look into several bright pieces” (162). Certainly, for Phoebe, she finds “the *truth profane*” as she tries quite literally to smash it (Feuerbach, as qtd. in *Invisible Circus* epigraph).

Luckily for her sake, Phoebe recovers from her acid trip and, while attempting to deliver a package for a friend, stumbles upon Wolf, Faith’s former long-term boyfriend, who takes Phoebe in. Later, as Phoebe and Wolf go on a tour of a German castle, she becomes aware of “someone watching them, a young girl with pale hair and a frail,

birdcage face” (186). Knowing that Phoebe used to be in that girl’s shoes—young, alone, lonely—she relishes being able to watch the girl instead of feeling as if she is the one being watched, and she purposefully “moved nearer Wolf, tapping his shoulder, whispering into his ear, arranging herself for the eyes of this girl and, in moments, believing the picture herself” (186). Here Phoebe clearly prefers “the appearance to the essence”—her then-platonic relationship with Wolf is irrelevant because there is an *appearance* of a romantic relationship (Feuerbach, as qtd. in *Invisible Circus* epigraph). Phoebe positions herself in relation to Wolf in the frame of the lonesome girl’s vision as if they were preparing for a picture—and they are, in a sense. Subsequently, it is a physical photo—several ones, in fact—that advances the book’s plot. Phoebe finds numerous photos of Faith and Wolf together, notably one of Faith in Munich after he had suggested they had separated in Berlin; thus, Wolf’s lie is revealed (178, 208-209), and the photo itself is striking:

It looked completely unlike the others, its colors stark and crisp as if a different camera had been used, though the effect was that of a strong, merciless light. In the picture Faith’s hands were knotted uncertainly at her waist, the smile wavering on her face as if it were a strain to hold. (208)

Here again, Egan uses the photograph as a historical document with the power to enlighten someone in the present, thus changing the course of the future. This photograph, which recorded a moment of a past reality, is an agent which alters Phoebe’s actions of the present, which in turn shapes her own future, not to mention allows the central plot of Egan’s novel to move one step closer to climax. The following day, Phoebe hands Wolf the picture and demands he explain (212).

For all her earlier dependence on the captured visual world through photographs and art, however, Phoebe does change by the end of the novel. Phoebe, who throughout the book had shared Faith's devotion to hoarding relics of the image-world (Faith herself stabbed herself in the thigh after their brother Barry broke one of their father's paintings over his knee (25)), is able to move past her fervent desire to keep forever the memorialized past. As her mother plans to move, Phoebe and her older brother Barry are charged with "sorting through their father's paintings" (334). Although Phoebe felt the same pull as she normally did to obsess over the paintings and felt "drawn by the thought of going back through them slowly, losing herself in the project" she acknowledges this desire as "the memory of a longing," rejects it, and "[t]he gloom seemed to lift from her then, like a dark oily bird flapping out of her chest" (334) as she sits on the grass alongside Barry. Not insignificantly, immediately after rejecting this desire, Phoebe "breathed the smell of grass and watched the slow-moving clouds"—that is, she is finally able to be fully present to the world around her because she is no longer living in the past (335). She can finally understand the world around her—the grass, the clouds—that were so inexplicable to her before when she tried to see them only through their relation to the past. Through Phoebe's newfound sensibility at the end of the novel, Egan implies the freedom available to those who are able to release their hold on the image-constructed past, the freedom of, to again reference Feuerbach, acknowledging truth *instead of* illusion.

As such, Egan's message regarding the image-world in *Invisible Circus* is a cautionary one: while photographs and other artistic renderings of the world may serve as images of *a* reality, they are 1.) *representations* of the reality, not reality itself, and 2.) the

reality of the past; this is to say, a false or at least partially irrelevant reality.

Acknowledging, as Wolf does, “‘how things—people—have a lot more power sometimes when they’re not actually there’” is critical (239). In the case of *Invisible Circus*, then, Egan’s message is two-fold: she implies that both recognizing the inherent power of photographs and images—that is, the power people can maintain even when captured during specific moments or artistic renderings—and moving on from this acknowledgment in order to look at and live in the present moment as opposed to living only in reference to the past, can ultimately allow one to live a fuller life.

Look at Me

As we move from Egan’s first full-length novel to her second one, I will investigate the ways in which Egan explores the fragility of the subject in the camera’s frame and the ability of image- and video-recording devices to “create” truth in *Look at Me*. This novel follows the storyline of Charlotte Swenson, a 30-something fashion model, as she attempts to revive her modeling career in New York City after a horrific car accident the year prior. Charlotte seems unable to help herself from engaging in risky behaviors involving what *New York Times* reviewer Katherine Dieckmann aptly labels “serious drinking, anonymous sex, flailing attempts to revive her career and a comically botched suicide attempt” (Katherine Dieckmann). In a similar vein as *Invisible Circus*, one can assume that the photographs (and videos) created within the story of *Look at Me* are, or at least will be, powerful exactly because of their implied future as historical and referential documents. In *Look at Me*, Egan introduces the camera as a weapon of enormous and often problematic influence due to its ability to create truth—or at least

what others will perceive as truth. And *Look at Me* is a novel obsessed with the information and images we perceive and their effect on what we believe to be true; perhaps unlike *Invisible Circus*, *Look at Me* is much more overt in its interest in investigating the relationship between the image world and reality. As such, Egan utilizes photo and video shoots in the story to underscore the problematic nature of technologies that can capture—and even create—realities in order to leave her readers questioning what, if any, role a camera can play in capturing *true* moments and videos as well as contemplating to what extent we should agree with Moose, a professor and the brother of Charlotte's ex-best friend, that “we are what we see” (111).

From the novel's beginning, the relation between photographic image and truth is at the forefront. As Charlotte prepares to re-enter the public eye after nearly a year's absence during which she underwent multiple surgeries and had 80 titanium screws implanted to hold her face together, she scrutinizes herself in the mirror before lunch with her agent as she tries to tell if her new face looks any different. She attempts to compare her present image to old pictures of herself, but laments that “[t]he old pictures were no help” because “like all good pictures, they hid the truth” (32). Certainly, Charlotte's assertion is troublesome because, if good photographs hide the truth, does this imply that the goal of photography is to lie? Charlotte confirms this mindset when, in the same scene, she relates she “would have killed for” a “bad” picture because “they were the only ones that could show you what you actually looked like” (33). Especially in her role as a model, where appearance often trumps all else, Charlotte has invested herself in an occupation deeply involved in photography and the capturing of specific moments. While she makes certain only a skewed projection of herself is available to the public via

images, Charlotte is actually quite invested in seeing the true selves of those with whom she interacts, which readers can come to understand through her explanation of the idea of a person's "shadow self" (34). Charlotte defines the "shadow self" as "that caricature that clings to each of us, revealing itself in odd moments when we laugh or fall still, staring brazenly from certain bad photographs" (34). Essentially, someone's shadow self is what s/he looks like without a mask. From the outset, then, Charlotte's two missions in this novel are paradoxical: hide the truth of herself and discover that of others.

In fact, Charlotte is not just aware of her decision to be deceitful, she readily claims it: "I lied a lot, and with good reason: to protect the truth—safeguard it, like wearing fake gems to keep the real ones from getting stolen ... I guarded what truths I possessed because information was not a thing—it was colorless, odorless, shapeless, and therefore indestructible" (69). Charlotte sees herself as guarding the truth rather than obfuscating it through her lies. Yet, safeguarding the truth by lying about it is like backstabbing a friend to ensure no one else hurts them—it doesn't quite work. Charlotte's attitude towards the truth is brought into question by the aforementioned Moose, a brilliant (albeit neurotic) up-and-coming professor who implemented a class experiment involving an actual bomb that endangered students' lives and derailed his career. In the novel's present, Moose is an obscure professor at Winnebago who is enthralled with the history of Rockford, Illinois and deeply unsettled by people's reliance on information, which he sees as "the inversion of a thing; without shape or location or component parts," instead of tangible objects (289). As a professor, Moose "hoped the vision he was trying to impart to his students would blazon forth with sudden clarity. And when it did, it would be everywhere they looked, because *we are what we see* ... And because this was

so—we are what we see—once a person had witnessed the vision, that person’s life would be razed like a twig shack by its annihilating force” (111). This idea, “we are what we see,” serves in opposition to Charlotte’s belief that the best thing one can do with the truth is to hide it in order to protect it. If all Charlotte allows the world to see are the good photos which function to hide the truth, then people would only see that side of Charlotte; as such, would Charlotte, in effect, *become* the person she portrays in photographs? While this would serve to “create” a newer, perhaps objectively better Charlotte, would this render the truth Charlotte means to hide irrelevant and therefore untrue? If nothing else, utilizing Moose’s idea—that is, to see is to become—to analyze Charlotte’s mindset of hiding the truth reveals Charlotte as someone disillusioned with her own reality.

Charlotte’s truth, too, differs from others’ perceptions of truth. When Charlotte prepares to do a photoshoot for Spiro, a newly famous photographer, she balks just before the shoot begins upon learning that Spiro cuts his models with a razor so they will be bleeding during the shoot (143-145). As hideous as this sounds, Spiro justifies his reasoning:

“I’m trying to get at some kind of truth here, in this phony, sick, ludicrous world. Something pure. Releasing blood is a sacrifice. It’s the most real thing there is. ... Everything is artifice,” Spiro went on. “Everything is pretending. You open a magazine, what is all that crap? Look how pretty I am, look how perfect my life is. But it’s lies, nothing is really like that ... I want to cut through that shit to what’s real and fundamental,” he said. And I want you to be part of it, Charlotte, that’s why I chose you. This

isn't about fashion—we're way past fashion here. This is about finding a new way to live in the world." (144-145)

Spiro's suggestion horrifies Charlotte and she refuses to do the shoot, choosing instead to watch as a back-up model takes her place. But did Charlotte refuse the photoshoot because she had no desire to (further) maim her body, or because a photoshoot such as this would be *too close* to the truth, something which she hopes to hide? As she watches the photoshoot unfold without her, she catches the eye of the model who took her place: "While the shutter clicked, we stared at each other, our gazes interlocked, and something passed between us: a wordless acknowledgement of the depravity that surrounded us" (146-47). At the instance of the moment's capture, Charlotte and the girl are staring at one other and have a moment of connection; yet, after the click of the shutter, the girl blinks and her eyes "were blank, as before" as if nothing had happened in the first place (147). Perhaps we can take the gaze between the women and corresponding blink to be a physical manifestation of the falseness of the reality that photographs portray—the moment of the photo exists not so much as the reality itself but as the abstraction to it; the flash of the camera, then, is an aberration in time's otherwise uninterrupted continuum (Benjamin 197). Both before and after the photo is taken, Charlotte and the model are disconnected from each other; it is only at the moment of the photograph they are briefly, intimately connected, and then never again. The girl's power lasts only for the instance of the photograph; in effect, she is powerless every moment the camera is *not* shooting photos.

The powerlessness of the person photographed is something Charlotte realizes herself midway through the novel. This realization comes after being "approached by a

dot-com company to star in a new reality show called *Ordinary People*,” where Charlotte, as nonfiction Flavorwire editor Elisabeth Donnelly explains, “would be followed around 24 hours a day, doing things both exciting and banal. *Ordinary People* would function as a social network and reality show at the same time” (Elisabeth Donnelly). Charlotte, who signs a contract as an Extraordinary (someone undergoing an unusual experience—in her case, returning to modeling after a devastating injury), realizes something during a meeting with Thomas, the mind behind *Ordinary People*, and Irene, the woman tasked with writing Charlotte’s life: “I crossed my arms, stilled by a revelation that had been mounting in me ever since our arrival in this bower of poured concrete: that as the ‘subject,’ I was both the center of attention and completely extraneous” (262). Charlotte realizes here that she has no power over the documentation of her life or the reality presented in it; as the one in the frame of the camera, she is simply a small piece in Thomas’s master plan behind *Ordinary People*. This powerlessness is further revealed slightly later in the novel, as she is being photographed again for *Ordinary People*. In a genuine moment of misery—“I was so disheartened by the time we adjourned to my balcony that I shuffled to the railing and stood motionless, staring at the river below”—Charlotte is startled:

A berserk cry jackknifed me into a cringe, nearly pitching me over the edge. Shaken, clutching the railing, panting fearfully, I turned to find [photographer] Randall Knapp in extremis behind his camera. “Yes! Great!” he yelled, shooting madly through his ululations, “Like that! Frownier. Bunch up your hands on the rail. Awkward, frightened—like that! Beautiful! Yes! Despair! God! Yes! Yes! Yes!” (316)

The photographer's stealing of a rare private moment from Charlotte typifies what Susan Sontag refers to in her "On Photography" as an example of the "aggression implicit in every use of the camera" (Susan Sontag 7). As the subject of a photoshoot, nothing Charlotte does is out of the question for documentation; perhaps better said, nothing is out of question for the photographer as the one wielding the camera. Sontag vilifies the camera as "a kind of passport that annihilates moral boundaries and social inhibitions, freeing the photographer from any responsibility toward the people photographed" (Sontag 41). This is quite the condemnation, yet the photographer's hijacking Charlotte's ability to be sad in private suggests the aptness of Sontag's thought. Indeed, cameras "transform behavior into spectacle," and Charlotte's distressed behavior is no exception (Sontag 110). Concerningly enough, this ability to document Charlotte's life trumps her wellbeing and even her life itself. Further, her experiences with photography in *Look at Me* not only violate her personal experiences but also require that she re-live her personal trauma.

The novel comes to a climax when Charlotte travels with Irene back to her hometown of Rockford as what she describes as "[a]n all-expenses-paid trip to the middle of nowhere, so Irene could photograph and videotape the house where I grew up, the cemetery where Ellen Metcalf and I used to smoke, my grade school ... and most vitally, the stretch of interstate where the accident had happened—the field where I'd landed in my burning car" (316). Charlotte and Thomas are at odds with each other as they plan the video reenactment of her crash. Charlotte notes flaws in Thomas's suggested reenactment (namely, the fact that Thomas's version of events has her walking through a cornfield after the accident even though the accident knocked her unconscious) to which Thomas

balks: “[F]orget all that, Char. Forget what happened. *This* is what happened, and it hasn’t even happened yet! It can happen any way we want” (388). Thomas’s statement both reveals his character and is problematic on numerous levels. He commands Charlotte to forget the truth of the situation that she lived through because of his assertion that “it hasn’t even happened yet” (338). Because Charlotte’s accident was not on video or photographed, the details of the event are a moot point. To Thomas, the event *hasn’t even happened* because, in the image world, something becomes real only upon its capture, documentation, and subsequent release to the internet where it will remain available for the public to decide what “actually” happened. John Roberts, author and professor of art and aesthetics at the Wolverhampton School of Art, in his “Photography after the Photograph: Event, Archive, and the Non-Symbolic” notes that “digital effects have become the means by which the real is self-consciously ‘put together’, transforming naturalism’s idea of the photograph as a neutral transcription of appearances into its very opposite: the figural (metaphoric) construction of the real, as in painting” (289).

Thomas’s ability to help “paint” the reality of Charlotte’s accident for the general public should disconcert and trouble us—shouldn’t what actually happened be what he wants to recreate in the video? And yet, Thomas’s goal is not *recreation* but *creation* itself—he aims not to transcribe the event visually but to construct it himself. Egan here poses a point we too-seldom think about: the truth, just like Charlotte’s accident, can happen any way those with the means to document it want. While I do not contend Egan is suggesting a wholesale denunciation of photographs, videos, and all other types of visual documentation, I do believe she advocates for a more cautious and critical eye when it comes to viewing images and videos, realizing the potential that they may be contrived.

To further underscore the problematic nature of Charlotte's reliving of the accident is the obvious—she must be the lead actress in a horror film with one crucial caveat: the horror of the accident *actually* happened to her, and she must reenact this trauma. Charlotte finds the reenactment “endless, blind, doomed ... It will never end. And even when it had, when it was all over and people were around us, something was still wrong ... ‘Charlotte can't stop screaming’” (406). Charlotte's unrelenting screams after the scene ends hint at the extent of the trauma the car accident and its subsequent reenactment caused her. That she was made to relive the accident, all for the sake of making the accident actually “happen,” underscores the inherent ruthlessness in Thomas's dedication to document all of Charlotte's life, especially her pain and re-experienced trauma. Further, Egan proves his unflinching determination in making the reenactment happen and his willingness to film at all costs by revealing that Charlotte, even over her screams, hears “Thomas in the background, muttering, ‘Beautiful, gorgeous’” (405). Just as a photographer seized Charlotte's moment of misery while she stood over her balcony as a prime opportunity to photograph her (316), so too does Thomas insert himself into the scene despite her audible agony (405). The ruthlessness which those controlling cameras have in their quest to document “reality” in Egan's *Look at Me* brings to question how much photographers and videographers actually look at their subjects as fellow human beings as opposed to objects of documentation.

While Part Three of Egan's novel, “Afterlife,” functions as a five-page epilogue, Egan's chooses not to call it such. In this brief space, Charlotte recounts her stardom upon her debut in *Ordinary People*: “That woman entertaining guests on her East River balcony in early summer, mixing rum drinks in such a way that the Bacardi and Coca-

Cola labels blink at the viewer haphazardly in the dusty golden light—she isn't me" (411). Instead of enjoying a glamorous stardom, however, Charlotte feels "gapingly fraudulent" and recounts that "I crept through my life, hoarding my occasional dreams and what few memories she [her famous self] hadn't already plundered, camouflaging my hopes and future aspirations in a palette of utter blandness lest they be caught in the restless beam of her overhead camera and broadcast to the world" (413). Charlotte finds herself not just influenced by the camera but controlled by it; as an object of the public's desire, she becomes a prisoner inside her own life and must hide her aspirations from the camera's gaze lest they be taken from her and given to the public as a source of entertainment. Her decision, then, to dig up the original contract she found with Thomas and find section 23, "Transfer of Identity," whereby she learns how to sell her identity for the chance to reclaim her life reveals just how oppressive the camera's constant gaze was (414). Yet, this decision to transfer her identity ultimately allows her to live in a blissful anonymity. As such, Charlotte has entered into the "afterlife" of stardom; that is, she is dead to the world but has new life in obscurity. As result of being dead to the world, there is not much more Charlotte has or needs to say. Thus, the "afterlife" is a mere five pages—hardly a footnote in a 415-page text. And yet, now Charlotte is free to live her life and merely watch (instead of *live*) as "a team of 3-D modelers and animators creates my likeness and superimposes her onto my balcony" (415). Charlotte Swenson lives on even after the real Charlotte Swenson had "dyed [her] hair" and "changed [her] name" to escape her identity (414-415), proving Charlotte's realization earlier in the novel that, as the subject in the frame of the camera, one is "both the center of attention and completely extraneous" (262). As such, Egan reveals that the camera's subject exists within the

photograph while being depersonalized by it. When Charlotte, or anyone else, poses for a photo, the photographer is often blind to the subject as an individual, seeing them only for what they may become within the context of the documentation and subsequent distribution of the photograph or video. In this way, Egan's *Look at Me* both questions the authenticity of the visual recording device and spotlights the fragility of the subject of the photo; while the photo's subject remains physically in-frame, oftentimes the photographer is looking at anything but the subject.

***Goon Squad* & "Black Box"**

As mentioned previously, Egan's *Goon Squad* has achieved widespread acclaim. With its unlikely dual inspirations, Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* and "The Sopranos," *Goon Squad* remains a notoriously difficult text even to categorize—the terms novel, loosely-connected short stories, and "concept album" (James Warner) have all been used. *Goon Squad* has challenged reviewers in their efforts to offer a succinct plot summary as well as Egan herself, who described it, as she said, "clumsily" as being "about a number of people but two primary characters who are a male music producer and his female assistant, and it follows them forward and backward through time over about 50 years, and it takes place in New York, California, and parts of Europe" (Jamie Feldmar). The text's trademark move reveals itself as Egan, unannounced, jumps any combination of decades, continents, characters, and writing styles (the novel features the aforementioned PowerPoint chapter as well as an extended feature story) from chapter to chapter.

Like *Look at Me*, *Goon Squad* introduces the camera as a weapon of enormous and often problematic power due to its ability to create truth—or at least what others will

perceive as truth, albeit perhaps in a less overt manner than *Look at Me*. Unlike *Invisible Circus*, which concerns itself less with the camera itself and more with the photograph as a pre-existing historical document—a memento of the past that nevertheless has the ability to alter and influence the present—*Goon Squad* presents the camera as a weaponlike tool whose power comes from its ability to create, capture, and/or alter history. As such, Egan's message in *Goon Squad* reduces the message of neither *Invisible Circus* nor *Look at Me*; rather, Egan further colors her complex message about photography in *Goon Squad* by placing the onus on those holding the camera. Implicitly, Egan asks: will the photographer obstruct, obscure, and obfuscate with his/her lens or instead use it to memorialize important temporal realities? As theorist and critic Sarah Sentilles's affirms, "[P]hotography has reduced the world to its image, and yet it is photography itself that can get us back to 'reality'. Photography created the sickness, and it is photography that offers the remedy" (Sentilles 50). Sentilles unveils a crucial point here: photography, in and of itself, can be a tool for both "sickness" and "remedy" (Sentilles 50) even though the camera is neither. The camera is simply the means for the photographer's end, in the same way that a guitar, at the mercy of the guitarist, can be played as part of a song either promoting either violence or world peace. So, while *Goon Squad* often presents the usage of cameras in a disturbing light, the camera itself remains an objective tool; therefore, Egan implies that the purpose for which photographers take pictures is ultimately what will decide whether photography reveals truth or conceals it.

Photography first plays a key role near the beginning of Egan's *Goon Squad* in Chapter 4, "Safari," where record producer Lou, "one of those men whose restless charm has generated a contrail of personal upheaval," takes his children and new girlfriend,

Mindy, on an African safari (60). To begin, the setting of a safari is rich with opportunity for the camera to be used as a weapon. Sontag notes the peculiarity of safaris when she mentions that “the ecology safari” is “[o]ne situation where people are switching from bullets to film” (Sontag 15). The safari is a moment where “instead of looking through a telescopic sight to aim a rifle, they [safari-goers] look through a viewfinder to frame a picture ... Guns have metamorphosed into cameras” (15). Keeping this in mind, it is no coincidence that the first camera we see in this chapter rests in the hands of Lou, an army veteran. We watch as he “opens the large aluminum case where his new camera is partitioned in its foam padding like a dismantled rifle” (*Goon Squad* 65). Surely, the “dismantled rifle” is not a casual comparison Egan uses; rather, this is just one of many moments in the book where photography and tools of violence are woven together. This consensus between Egan and Sontag’s perspective on safari links itself to the idea of camera-as-weapon, a recurring theme throughout Egan’s work in *Goon Squad* and elsewhere, such as Charlotte’s “camouflaging” of her hopes in *Look at Me* so as to remain unseen by “the restless beam of her overhead camera” (*Look at Me* 413).

Moreover, the first action Lou takes with this camera is no less violent as he “thrusts his torso from the open roof and takes pictures, ignoring the rule to stay seated while the jeep is moving” (*Goon Squad* 66). Lou is sounding more like a soldier than a photographer, as we now see him emerge from the jeep resembling some sort of gunner as he begins “shooting” pictures. Yet Egan has been setting up this idea of camera-as-weapon from even before Lou holds the camera. On the second page of the chapter, she instructs us that “[t]he safari is a new business venture of Lou’s old army buddy, Ramsey” (60). The entire idea of the safari—or at least the safari Lou takes his family

on—is encompassed by the fact that it’s a business spearheaded by a soldier. Just as Lou and Ramsey “drank and misbehaved” (60) together when they were in service, so too does the safari function as second tour of duty for Lou, in which he both acts with the violence of the soldier and recounts old army stories with Ramsey (73).

That said, Lou is not alone in his use of camera as weapon. Through the actions of other members of the safari, Egan further illuminates the power of photography by revealing its ability to subvert time and mask violence. Other safari-goers include members of one of Lou’s bands, the Mad Hatters (66). Chronos, the bassist, along with the Hatters’ guitarist and their respective girlfriends “are locked in a visceral animal-sighting competition. ... They challenge one another nightly over who saw more and at what range, invoking witnesses from their respective jeeps and promising definitive proof when they develop their film back home” (66). Their sightseeing competition has become a heated rivalry, one that will be definitively concluded only by the development of film of their photos once they get back home. That said, their aggression in taking the photos is not without personal danger. One afternoon, as their guide, Albert, parks them beside a pride of lions, Chronos goes into competition mode, his “hands shak[ing] as he spools film into his camera. ‘Fuck,’ he keeps muttering. ‘Fuck’” (67). His physical fumbling with the film reveals the anxiety of someone who has power but is not ready to use it.

Chronos cannot contain himself from “skulking among the lions, holding his camera close to the faces of the sleeping male and female” until a lion “vaults at Chronos in an agile, gravity-defying spring” and “lands on his head, flattening him instantly” (69). Albert now uses a literal rifle to shoot and kill the lioness, and Chronos emerges from the situation with 32 stitches but, more importantly to him, “a blistering victory over his

bandmate and both girlfriends” (69). Certainly, Chronos by no means should have been invading the space of the lions; through his frenzy for documentation, he disregarded the value of his own life. His determination to capture the moment occurs only because of the importance he put on his hopeful future success in proving his merit at the sightseeing competition. The power he had to document the lions pushed the danger of the present moment to the back of his mind because he was too bloodthirsty at the thought of future success. One must remember what the photograph would show: an impressive close-up that would certainly make him victorious in the contest. Just as important, though, is what the photograph would not show: the violence inflicted upon Chronos and the lions. As we can see, photographs warp history for the viewer. An onlooker at a close-up picture of lions will simply be impressed at the photo, remaining ignorant of the disturbing violence resulting from Chronos’s desperation for capturing the picture.

Egan continues in subsequent chapters to reveal people’s (ab)use of photographs as documents people provide in the absence of other documentation in an attempt to create a history that conceals as much as it reveals. In Chapter 8, “Selling the General,” we follow as both Dolly and the General attempt to reshape their individual infamies. For her part, Dolly, formerly known as La Doll, was a wildly successful publicist whose prestige toppled after hosted an enormous and now-infamous New Year’s party (141). Her idea to include suspended trays of bubbling oil and water to amaze her guests during the party failed disastrously as the same trays began to melt and seriously maim them (141-142). The General, analogously, is a genocidal dictator on the run from assassination attempts and wanting to better his image and gain “American sympathy” (138). This pair comes together as Dolly takes the offer from Arc, the General’s right-

hand man, to work as a publicist for the General (138). The chapter opens with Dolly viewing two photographs whose composition she dictated to Arc via a phone call. The first photo fails to improve the General's image: "When she [Dolly] saw the general's picture in the Times a few days later, she almost choked on her poached egg: he looks like a baby, a big sick baby with a giant mustache and a double chin. The headline couldn't have been worse: General B.'s Odd Headgear Spurs Cancer Rumors, Local Unrest Grows" (137). In this case, the headline describes with the public's negative response, indicating continued unrest against a man the public has no reason to like in the first place. Here, Egan shows readers an example of a photo that does not reshape history, but confirms it, although this is the opposite of what both Dolly and the General want.

As such, Dolly's next directions to Arc are to offer instructions on how to compose the next photograph to redirect the public's view. We then proceed to the second scene in the chapter: "It was several weeks before the general's picture appeared again. Now the hat was pushed back and the ties were gone. The headline read: 'Extent of B's War Crimes May Be Exaggerated, New Evidence Shows.' It was the hat. He looked sweet in the hat" (141). Here, we see the public's perception shift from accusation to pacification, as the reader asks, along with the general public: "How could a man in a fuzzy blue hat have used human bones to pave his roads?" (141). It is essential to note that neither the original nor the secondary photo changed anything about the atrocities the General committed (or did not commit, although we are led to suspect his guilt). Despite the fact that history, what actually happened in the past, remained unchanged, we see this new photograph as the catalyst for renewed discussion regarding, and likely shifting perception of, the General's dark past. Now that his public image has become pliable to

change, Dolly—at Arc’s promptings—undertakes a project to get the General photographed smiling next to a movie star, because she knew “[i]t didn’t matter how many thousands he’d slaughtered—if that collective vision of him could include a dance floor, all that would be behind him” (144). Here, the reader must ask along with Queensland research fellow Max Quanchi (2006) in his “Visual Histories and Photographic Evidence,” “Can photographic evidence stand alone as the basis for a history, for example, of ... a particular era or transition within a colonial regime[?]” (167). That is, to what extent will the viewers of the General’s photographs allow them as a stand-in for an accurate history? In Dolly’s professional opinion, photographic evidence *will* “stand alone as the basis for a history” for the General. Simply put, whether or not he slaughtered thousands of people simply doesn’t matter; to shift the public’s perception of the General, she needs not to fix the General, but only his “image problems” (144). Considering this, we can begin to understand the effectiveness at the camera in manipulating history is precisely because history may not need to be manipulated so much as the perception of those individuals involved with the history in question. Dolly doesn’t need to convince the public that the genocide never happened so much as refocus their opinion regarding the General from main perpetrator of a genocide to a friendly-looking man on the dance floor (144).

Now that the General’s image has pliability, Dolly seeks to root him in the public’s trust by pairing him with an American star (144). In the following scenes, she takes her daughter, Lulu, on a business trip where they accompany former film star Kitty Jackson, who “was one of those people who ‘couldn’t take the bullshit,’” on a photoshoot with this genocidal dictator (144, 147-148). Dolly, charged with documenting the

experience, takes with her a hidden camera with an “activator” she keeps “nestled in her palm” (157). Upon close read, this sounds much more like a grenade than a camera.

Finally, as Kitty approaches the General, Dolly begins snapping pictures:

It was only when Kitty pressed her narrow green body to the general’s uniformed chest and closed her eyes for a moment that Dolly came to—click—and the general seemed disconcerted, unsure what to do, patting Kitty’s back out of politeness—click—at which point Kitty took both his hands (heavy and warped, the hands of a bigger man) into her own slender hands and leaned back, smiling into his face—click—laughing a little, shyly ... And then the general smiled. It happened without warning: his lips pulled away to reveal two rows of small yellow teeth—click—that made him appear vulnerable, eager to please. Click, click, click—Dolly was shooting as fast as she could without moving her hand, because that smile was it, the thing no one had seen, the hidden human side of the general that would dumbfound the world. (158)

The increasing succession of clicks as the General smiles heightens the importance of the moment. Through her use of clicks to bring this scene to climax as opposed to the actual unfolding of the scene itself, Egan implicates this scene’s underlying significance: the moment is important not because of what is happening but because what is happening is being captured, with each click representing a snapshot frozen in time. Each click has the weight of the world’s perception of the General behind it. Although the moment is just that, the photograph representing the moment will transcend it infinitely.

Kitty, a formerly beloved but now washed up actress, realizes that in this photoshoot she has just “engineered her own salvation ... with a little from the despot to her left” (159). Yet the same self-destructive tendencies that led to Kitty’s first downfall now put her, Dolly, and Lulu’s lives in danger, as she begins posing sardonic questions to the General: “‘So,’ Kitty said, ‘is this where you bury the bodies? ... Do you drink their blood, or just use it to mop their floors?’” (159-160). At the General’s command, soldiers take Kitty hostage while Dolly and Lulu are rushed out of the General’s compound and whisked home—luckily for Dolly, she has everything she needs already stored in her camera (159-160). Upon returning home, Dolly immediately goes to print the photos to memorialize the moment she captured (162). Here too we see a parallel with Chronos and his bandmates at the safari. While history actually occurred during the safari and photoshoot, respectively, the events only come into lasting significance upon the production of the physical photograph. The photo print shop worker is amazed at the photos, asking, “These shots...did you use Photoshop, or what? ... They look, like, totally real” (162). While his reaction to seeing close-up photographs of an infamous genocidal dictator is understandable, his question of realness of the photos momentarily brings the authenticity of the photographed world into question. His question to Dolly both attests to the potential power of photographs and functions as a relevant question for us today: if a photograph can reduce the world to its image, is this an image we can trust (Sentilles 50)? His question is what Egan wants us to be asking in our own lives when we see a photograph matched with a catchy caption—just because it looks this way, is it really true? Sontag sheds some light on this attraction of understanding the “real” world through photography as she writes, “The lure of photographs, their hold on us, is that they

offer at one and the same time a connoisseur's relation to the world and a promiscuous acceptance of the world. ... Photography's ultra-mobile gaze flatters the viewer, creating a false sense of ubiquity, a deceptive mastery of experience" (Sontag 63-64). Put this way, how could a physical photograph not be alluring as a stand-in for history, or at least as a document which alters our perception of it? At the click of the camera, a three-dimensional world can become flattened and simplified onto a 3x5 piece of paper we can frame on the wall as a physical manifestation of a memory or event.

Dolly, well-aware of the allure of photographs, remains silent about the photoshoot until after making the prints (Egan 162). Further, even as she begins sending out the photographs, she sends out no textual explanation alongside them because they themselves are able to exist as autonomous texts. The idea of a photograph as having the ability to exist within "the discipline of history," the scholar Jäger reminds us, did not come about until relatively recently (Jäger 42). And yet, he notes how "[i]mages, especially photographs ... are recognized as important elements in social, political and cultural discourses and can no longer be ignored. ... The potential of visual evidence seems unfathomable" (Jäger 52-53). Because of the power of the photograph, Dolly simply circulates the image online, makes contact with Arc, and watches the public eye come to accept the General, persuaded by the photographs alone (162-163). Dolly's initial intuition was right. That is, furthering the General's appeal and the argument for his humanity by matching him up with a TV star was simply irresistible for the general public—they weren't just persuaded, they demanded more photographic evidence of this new side of him.

Arc's explanation illustrates this as, when Dolly and Lulu meet up with him for dinner months later he describes, how

the photographers began showing up, first one or two whom the soldiers ferreted out of the jungle and imprisoned, then more, too many to capture or even count—they were superb hiders, crouching like monkeys in the trees, burying themselves in shallow pits, camouflaging inside bunches of leaves. Assassins had never managed to locate the general with any precision, but the photographers made it look easy. (164)

We can see paparazzi so intent on capturing the General's photograph they are willing to risk physical capture. This example hearkens us back to the safari chapter in a few different ways. First, these photographers' death-defying feats to capture the photo remind us of Chronos, who endangers himself taking photos at point-blank of the lions in his relentlessness to try to win the sight-seeing competition. Further, the photographers are shown as having militaristic power in a manner akin to how Lou "thrusts his torso" up from the jeep to shoot pictures (66). In fact, these photographers are revealed as being even superior to assassins in their quest to find the General (164). The boldness of these photographers further proves the immense power a photograph can have—capturing the right photo is so important they are willing to *chase* a genocidal dictator to obtain it.

The General's eventual public appearance with Kitty in the face of hordes of cameras further brings to mind just how much power photographers have and calls into question how much power the public yields them. After ten days, the General leaves his enclave with Kitty and "walked with her into the phalanx of cameras awaiting him" (164). Two points are of note here. First, we again see photography linked with military.

The photographers do not encircle the dictator and Kitty; rather, they stand at the ready in a military formation, the phalanx. Second, we see this is not a phalanx of photographers but of cameras. Egan's use of synecdoche here is important. These photographers have abandoned their individuality so much so they can be represented solely by their cameras. Is there a true presence of people behind the flickering shutters of the cameras? What does it mean for a photographer to take a picture, given that the act of doing so renders him or herself invisible? Perhaps most concerning is the question that is easiest to forget—can the General really be excused for a genocide because he was seen smiling with an American celebrity? What does it mean for Egan show readers that inexcusable violence can be sidestepped with the flash of a camera at the right time in the right place?

If, as Sentilles suggests, photography may be the only remedy to its own self-created sickness (Sentilles 50), one must ask what Egan is suggesting through her depictions of photography—can it be both remedy and disease? I contend that Egan's depiction of photography in *Goon Squad* reveals that, while photography can shape a fiction, it cannot reshape reality. Readers can hardly read about the General's country's "transition to democracy" (Egan 163) without skepticism. Further, while Egan chooses to have Dolly refuse "offers of work from mass murderers hungry for a fresh start" (164), the reader still receives reminders of Dolly's personal complicity with violence at the end of the chapter. Even though she moved, she receives occasional shipments of star fruit, reminiscent of her visit to the genocidal dictator (152-153) and shares the fruit with Lulu at night as they "feast on the sweet, strange flesh" (165). Now, Egan is providing us with more than a description of star fruit here. Her deliberate use of the word "flesh" calls to mind Kitty's questions to the General about the bodies of those he killed—"Do you eat

them? ... Or do you leave them out so the vultures can do it?’” (160). At the least, Egan’s carnal description of the star fruit hearkens back to the first visual associated with it, when the fruit “lay in obscene heaps, studded with flies” (152), a description that bears an eerie resemblance to how one may describe a heap of bodies, murdered in a genocide. The continued shipments of the fruit, then, remain an ominous reminder of Dolly’s complicity in helping a genocidal dictator (153). While Dolly’s reputation is restored and she and Lulu now live comfortably, the way in which they allowed a genocidal dictator run free in the process bring into question how much of a remedy photography can be.

Yet Egan does not show all photography as sickness: by moving outside the realm of *Goon Squad* but within the same the same fictional world, we find a more optimistic presentation of photography in Egan’s “Black Box.” A short story released in 2012 via a series of tweets from *The New Yorker* over a 10-day period with one tweet a minute for an hour each night (Gee), [“Black Box”](#) offers the reader an interesting plunge “into the 2030s and a world of citizen espionage” (Lisa Gee). Interestingly enough, “Black Box” stars none other than Lulu, Dolly’s daughter, who also appears as a young adult in *Goon Squad*’s Chapter 13, “Pure Language.” Egan herself indicated her interest pursuing *Goon Squad* characters beyond the book itself in an interview with Deborah Treisman from *The New Yorker* and mentioned her particular interest with Lulu as she said she asked herself, “What would be an extreme future for her [Lulu]? What might happen to her?” (Deborah Treisman). The result, of course, is the Lulu seen in “Black Box.” In it, grown-up Lulu is working “undercover by the Mediterranean Sea” (*The New Yorker*) as she performs her role as a “Beauty,” whose “job is to extract information from a ‘powerful ... violent and ruthless’ terrorist using a combination of the traditional techniques of seduction and

submission, an array of recording and communications technologies implanted in her body” (Gee). The story, told entirely in second person, reads as an instruction manual for other Beauties. As a camera flash brings this short story to a climax, “Black Box” proves itself essential to include in the following discussion on Egan’s masterful portrayal of the tool that is photography. Additionally, beyond the photography and character connection linking the two written works, “Black Box” could easily be read as a fourteenth chapter for *Goon Squad*, which Egan composed in such a manner that each chapter could be read as a standalone short story.

As mentioned, “Black Box” stars grown-up Lulu, who is spying on and collecting information regarding a powerful villain. She has numerous intrabody technologies implanted, perhaps the most important of which ends up being “[t]he camera implanted in your left eye” (“Black Box” Section 25). Lulu catches the terrorist she is trying to seduce “making sketches” with his counterpart and knows she must use this camera to photograph them (“Black Box” Section 25). After believing “[h]is attention to the handset” is distraction enough for her to safely take a photograph, we see Lulu directing us to “[m]ove close to the sketches you wish to photograph, allowing them to fill your field of vision. Hold very still. A flash is far more dramatic in total darkness” (Section 27). Interestingly enough, the climax of the camera flash, something which would take only milliseconds, is understood to happen between the sentences as it remains unwritten—the reader instead experiences the results of the climax, in the same way that a victim of a gunshot is impacted not by the gunshot itself but by the resulting wound the bullet leaves in one’s body. This moment of flash is able to act outside of time, which is something we understand inherently as people, shown when the flash results in “[a]n

epithet in another language, followed by ‘What the fuck[?]’ (Section 27). Indeed, the flash from a camera represents a moment with an infinite ability to transcend itself—a camera flash does not just memorialize a moment but captures it and allows for physical proof of the moment through the medium of the photograph. San Jose State professor and scholar Paul Douglass reminds us “we are never sure what is Now until we learn what is later becomes” (Douglass 17). Photography allows physical proof of that “Now” via the physical photograph, revealing itself to be an immense weapon in suggesting to people what the then-present moment has, in fact, become. Whether a photo is taken for justice (Lulu taking a picture of a criminal’s blueprints) or against it (Dolly taking contrived humanizing photo of the dictator), Egan reveals the camera as a tool which enables people to freeze a specific moment in an effort to manipulate history. In this way, Egan allows the use of photography in “Black Box” to function as a counterpoint for the photography in *Goon Squad*.

Throughout “Black Box,” Lulu’s willingness to put her own life at stake as a means of saving others is an intriguing inverse of the situation we see in *Goon Squad* with her mother, Dolly. Growing up, Lulu watched Dolly put their lives at stake to make money by capturing a few positive photographs of a genocidal dictator. Now, however, Lulu places her own life at stake as part of what Egan terms “the new heroism”: “In the new heroism, the goal is to merge with something larger than yourself. In the new heroism, the goal is to throw off generations of self-involvement” (Section 21). Lulu has renounced the self-involvement of past generations and offers her physical self as a potential sacrifice to try to save those back home; perhaps through Lulu’s selflessness she is able to rid herself of any trace of complicity she felt, in retrospect, after accompanying

her mother to help a genocidal dictator maintain his power (153). By choosing Lulu to photograph the essential documents, Egan reveals photography as a form of art intertwining closely with both violence and resistance to that violence. In this way, through close readings of *Goon Squad* and supplemental analysis from “Black Box,” one can come to understand Egan’s suggestion regarding photography as a multivalent art form; regardless of its role, it is one that is woven together with the concept of militaristic might. Ultimately, Egan shows us that whether photography is sickness or remedy lies in the intent of the person behind the lens and their decision to accept or reject this new heroism we all face. Moreover, Egan’s “new heroism” ideals of prioritizing the good of humanity over the good of the individual should stand as a fundamental principle for photographers. In a world where it is plausible “in situations where the photographer has the choice between a photograph and a life, to choose the photograph” (Sontag 12), implementing Egan’s concept of “new heroism,” should simplify the choice for photographers—a life does and *must* outweigh a photograph in terms of import. While lauding the ideals of “the new heroism” as panacea to the complications photography presents the world may be an overreach, contemplating how to apply these ideals as photographers and viewers of photographs alike merit consideration.

Conclusion

What, then, are Egan’s readers to make of her nuanced view on the already-complicated art of photography? Are photos, as Sutton suggests, “connected to the birth of thought” (Sutton 230) or something far more sinister? To understand what we are to make of Egan’s implicit suggestions about photography and image within the entirety of

her works, let us briefly consider her first major published work, *Emerald City and other short stories* (1996). The title short story follows Rory, a photographer's assistant dating "a failing model [Stacey] whom he adored against all reason" (42). The significance of this short story in relation to photography, however, reveals itself not through Rory's girlfriend but his roommate, Charles, a food photographer.

Throughout the story, the reader is privy to three different "foods" Charles works with: ice cream, breakfast cereal, and steak. The ice cream Charles that prepares "looked more like ice cream in pictures than real ice cream did," but turns out to be nothing more than "salty dough" (46). Yet, this is not the only moment where Charles's model food defies conventional logic: later in the story, "Rory had been amazed to learn that in breakfast cereal shots it was standard to use Elmer's glue instead of milk. 'It's whiter,' Charles had explained. 'Also it pours more slowly and doesn't soak the flakes'" (46). The fact that utilizing glue instead of milk was not just acceptable but commonplace for these photos reveals the imaginative extremes available to photographers and the false normalcy they contrive through staged photographs. Scholar Walter Benjamin offers another example where a visual reality is utterly falsified in the context of a film:

Let us assume that an actor is supposed to be startled by a knock at the door. If his reaction is not satisfactory, the director can resort to an expedient: when the actor happens to be at the studio again he has a shot fired behind him without his being forewarned of it. The frightened reaction can be shown now and be cut into the screen version. Nothing more strikingly shows that art has left the realm of the 'beautiful

semblance' which, so far, had been taken to be the only sphere where art could thrive. (Benjamin 801)

When inserted into the context of the original scene, the actor's frightened reaction convinces the viewers; yet, knowing his reaction occurred not because of a knock at the door but because of a gunshot unsettles them. Similarly, Charles's revelation of the glue-milk tarnishes the picture on cereal boxes that millions of Americans see every day because the milk splashing into a hi-definition bowl of texturized cereal is not just staged but utterly inedible. Not only is the photo staged, but no one's cereal will *ever* look like Rory's photographs of cereal, assuming no one uses glue as a milk substitute; just like Rory "found this disturbing in a way he still didn't understand," so too do we as Egan's readers (46).

The last example we see with Charles's food photography elicits the most visceral reaction within Rory. Upon coming home, Rory finds Charles with "a blowtorch plugged into the wall, and a dismantled smoke alarm lay at his feet" (53). It sounds like Charles is prepping to annihilate something; instead, Charles is practicing for a steak photo shoot the upcoming day—"meat is my weak point," he admits (53). Here again, Egan shows photography as innately linked with danger and weaponry as Charles both has a weapon and has uninstalled a safety device for the sake of a photo. After using this weapon on the steak, "it was indistinguishable from a medium-rare steak straight off the grill. Rory felt an irrational surge of appetite, a longing to eat the meat in spite of knowing it was raw and cold" (54). With this falsely cooked steak, Egan reveals our attraction to the appearance of perfection even when we know that "perfect" is a false reality. We want to believe the images we see; although we cannot help being disturbed by the falseness at

their core, there seems to be a part of us wanting to be fooled. There is an undeniable attraction to the reality presented via the image: how easy it is to wrap our minds around the 2D world of the 5x7 photograph, which simplifies through its dual exclusion of all moments surrounding the photograph and of all objects save the few made to fit within the frame.

Like Rory, we know the trick behind these beautiful-looking model foods: the ice cream is salty dough, the cereal is drenched in Elmer's glue, the steak is raw. While these examples of photography are food-related, they function in a parallel manner to any of the number of aforementioned images: Dolly's pictures of the General, Phoebe thinking she sees Faith in the store window, and Thomas's desired reenactment of Charlotte's car crash. Each of the images seduces the onlooker—they look so real that they *must* be true, the photograph tempts the viewer to think. In the case of the photos of Kitty and the General, the public could literally *hold* the photo; disbelieving a lie so tangible you can hold it in your hand is difficult indeed. Despite the difficulty of analyzing the image-world in order to assess how real its presented reality is, Egan suggests this analysis on part of the onlooker is a necessity. Just as consumers of these photographed foods would endanger themselves physically if they consume that which was photographed, so too does Egan suggest, on a larger scale, that consumers of photography put themselves at risk through their over-eagerness and willingness to believe the reality of the photograph without further investigation. The danger of unquestioned belief for most onlookers of photography is less immediately apparent than consuming undercooked meat yet even more dangerous. For example, the public's belief of the *Goon Squad's* General having democratized his country due to his photographs with an American movie star effectively

exonerates him, a genocidal dictator, from what we are led to believe has been thousands of senseless deaths. Passivity on part of the viewer allows the General to go unquestioned; this serves both to absolve him and present similar opportunities for other current and future dictators, exemplified by how, after the General's success story in reversing his image, "Dolly was deluged with offers of work from mass murderers hungry for a fresh start" (*Goon Squad* 164).

Again, I assert not that Egan wants an end to photography; rather, she suggests a necessity on our part to investigate the reality a photograph presents. Like Scotty in Egan's *Goon Squad*, we must take it upon ourselves to "know what happened between A and B" (*Goon Squad* 101). While the meaning to Scotty's question roots itself in a measurable time period ("A is when we were both in the band, chasing the same girl. B is now"), our question as viewers of the photograph must root itself in meaning: what happened between the photographer (A) and the subjects (B) (101)? The photograph presents only the end result and not the process that the photographer and/or subject(s) undertook in order to produce the result.

For the part of photographers, they must understand the power of their tool—the camera—and use it responsibly. As an inanimate object, the camera itself can neither be absolved nor condemned; it remains a tool given action and purpose by the person who holds it. Whether or not photographers, a group that in the age of smart phones represents much of humanity, choose to use the camera as a weapon for personal gain and deceit or to take on the "new heroism" of Lulu in "Black Box," the choice remains in their hands.

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